GRIEF AND THE CONFIDENT LIFE
I Thessalonians 4:9-14, 18
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Gerald J. Gregg
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The formulas for facing sorrow are as numerous as the world's religions. The Stoic accepts suffering with grim resolution and absorbs it. The Mohammedan says, "Kismet," everything is the will of God, and submits to it. The Buddhist meditates on sorrow and decides to avoid it by escaping to Nirvana. The Hindu traces sorrow back to previous incarnations and sees it pursuing him in this and all future life and so he knows it is futile to run or hide or fight. The righteous Jew of Old Testament times believed that being righteous, fulfilling all the commandments, should excuse him from suffering.

But Christianity is another story. In the two thousand years of our history, we Christians have had many differences and divisions among ourselves. Great theological disputes have arisen about the nature of God, about the person of Christ, about the work of the Holy Spirit. There have been sharp dissensions over the inspiration of Scripture, over baptism and the Lord's Supper. Anything and everything about our religion has occasioned arguments. Except for one thing: The fact of the Resurrection of Christ. Some may express that fact as physical history, others as spiritual reality, but Christians everywhere in every age are united in the knowledge that Christ, though crucified, lives and reigns and calls us to share his victory.

Therefore, in the face of human sorrow Christianity does not preach stoicism, or fatalism, or escapism, or futility as other religions do. Our faith does not suggest that human suffering is divine retribution or punishment. Instead, Christianity proclaims that life's sorrows can result in good. No one is exempt from sorrow, but it can be confronted in such a way and with such faith that the suffering itself strengthens us and increases our service to God. Helping all that happen is a major responsibility of each Christian community such as this congregation.

Nevertheless, I can hardly begin to estimate the number of times I have heard church people say, as if pointing their finger at themselves or at someone in deep sorrow, "The Bible says not to grieve." People berate themselves: "If I really followed the Bible, I wouldn't be sad and devastated." Today's scripture contains the portion of the Bible to which they refer. Paul and his companions Timothy and Silvanus are writing to church members in the Greek city of Thessalonica. They are giving very practical instruction about the life-style of Christians. We read, then from the fourth chapter of their first letter:

> But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.

good Hebrew and Greek words that describe a wide range of divine attributes. The result was a very narrow, impoverished concept of God as male. The church is learning better now and is beginning to re-discover the full Biblical appreciation of God. We are still tied to scholarly references and Bible translations from the past. But they can express the truth of the Doctrine of the Trinity even when nouns and pronouns are wrong, as you will hear in some quotations.

He who has seen me has seen God, Jesus told his diciples. And we confess that is true, for as we learn of Christ we think of God in terms of the teaching, the life, and the sacrifice of Jesus. Then, continuing his teaching to the disciples, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...: you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." And these words set forth perhaps the first expression of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

One of the earliest church leaders described the doctrine this way: "belief in one God, existent in and manifest under three modes or aspects of being" and these three aspects were purely temporary. Well, that certainly clears it all up. If that sentence is as hard for you to swallow as for me, maybe we'll find the nineteenth-century Englishman James Martineau more helpful. This is his definition: "The Father is God in himself; the Son is God manifested in the universe and in history, and brought to focus in the frame of redemption; while the Holy Spirit is God in communion with man's inner spirit."

Regardless who is describing the Doctrine of the Trinity, the beginning point must be with God the Creator. The important statement here comes first out of the experience of ancient Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is one." That is, we cannot divide our allegiance between two or more little gods or idols. We cannot worship at the altar of security or success or pride and still serve God. God is one and demands our full loyalty.

This belief in one God is known as ethical monotheism. It was developed through the history of the Old Testament people. The utterances of the prophets, the leading through the wilderness from Egypt to the promised land, the survival and growth of the tiny unprotected nation Israel, the punishment of the nation in the time of exile — all these were understood by the Israelites as showing the power of the one God. Knowing that God is one is essential and true, but the centuries of Israel's swinging back and forth between faithfulness and unfaithfulness demonstrated that humanity needed a fuller knowledge of God. So, for the Christian, two new facts of history and experience have changed our thought of the one eternal God.

The first of these new facts is Jesus of Nazareth. He brought God near in a new, intimate way. Firm believers in the unity of God found themselves thinking of Jesus whenever they thought of God. They knew that God was like Christ and that God was in Christ. Yet Jesus was not God, for he suffered pain and death. He was truly human. He was the incarnation of God. So they came to speak of the Father and the Son; and even if they couldn't quite explain it or think it out, it was at the very heart of their faith.

At this point it is good for us to keep fairly busy and continue to carry on as much of our usual activity as possible. It is certainly not good for someone else to take over completely, well meaning as they might be. That would be like the surgery patients in the past who were told not to do anything, not even to get out of bed for several days after the operation. Doctors then discovered that forced inactivity often delayed the patient's recovery.

Therefore, anyone wanting to be helpful in times of grief should consider this principle: Let the person know you are there and that you care. Be available to help if everything breaks down. But normally let the person have the therapeutic value of doing whatever he or she is up to doing.

The next stage of grief is emotional release. It comes about the time it dawns on a person how dreadful the loss really is. An uncontrollable urge surges up to express that grief. And that is exactly what we ought to do. We have been given tear glands for a reason.

For a generation, psychologists have told us this is a particular problem for men. That is a very old saw by now. But I don't see that the situation has changed markedly. It works this way: We men have been taught from the cradle that boys don't cry. So, when a boy is eight and hurts himself, he doesn't dare to cry, not at eighteen when something happens he needs to cry about. At thirty-eight when some great loss is suffered, he cannot cry.

So, let it be said again: Crying is not a sign of weakness. In fact, it is more often the tearless macho who develops weakness. If he always holds himself in, always maintains stiff-upper-lip, dry-eyed calm, he may well be headed for trouble like an ulcer or a breakdown. The scriptures tell that when great calamities came to the hardiest men, the strongest men of faith, they wept bitterly. The Bible says their "tears were with them all the night long."

There comes the time in the process of deep grief when we feel depressed and very lonely. It is as if God is no longer available, as if God does not care. During this time we are sure that no one else has ever grieved as we are grieving. A person feels isolated and utterly depressed. That feeling is to be expected after a significant loss. Temporary depression is a part of good healthy grief.

Depression comes to all people when something or someone they love and treasure dearly is taken from them. Even the songs of faithfulness in the Bible--the Psalms--reflect this depression. The 42nd Psalm crys out: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?...I say to God, my rock: 'Why hast thou forgotten me?'...My adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'"

Depression can lead us to believe that no one has suffered as we, that life can never be good again. An ancient story from India tells how a woman in deep grief one morning went to Buddha to plead that her child might return to life. She could not be consoled. Nothing Buddha said helped her. So Buddha sent her on a project: He told her to take all day to go from house to house all through the town and collect a green pepper from each family who had never had a deep grief. Then, when she returned with her basket full of peppers, Buddha promised to answer her need. But when evening came, her basket was still empty and she returned to Buddha with new understanding. Everyone she met had had some grief such as hers.

At first a new idea is invisible and abstract. It can't be measured or photographed. Then the discoverer writes down a part of the growing idea as a short magazine article and, if in a scholarly field, perhaps several articles are written, each describing a different facet or application of the main idea. Then, the idea having expanded, a book is published to describe as thoroughly as possible the whole idea and all its ramifications. Now the idea is solid and concrete. The book is published, is passed from person to person and the idea is communicated from mind to mind. It becomes a part of the life of a great many people who had never thought of that idea before.

So, here we have three separate realities: an idea, a book and the influence of the book. These three are not separate really; they are closely connected. One without the other two would mean very little. What good is an idea which no one ever hears of; or a book which has no influence, no impact; or influence without a good central idea to guide it? And the discoverer, the originator, the author, the inventor is in all three of these.

So, too, the creative power of God is invisible. It grows and expands and moves toward becoming fully concrete throughout the experiences of the people of Israel — the burning bush, the deliverance from bondage, the lives of the prophets — just as the discoverer's idea was partially expressed and grew little by little in the magazine and journal articles. Then as in the book, this creative power takes substance in the person Jesus of Nazareth who embodies completely God's creativity, for that is what redemption through Christ is. The influence of Jesus then radiates in all directions and the Holy Spirit becomes an influence upon people in all places and in all times. All three are connected and God is in all three.

The truth expressed by the Doctrine of the Trinity, then, says these things to us. In this manner we know God — the creative power traditionally called Father, the created substance which is Son, and the influence which follows and continues and dwells with us and in us forever — the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Most gracious, loving God, help us to stretch our understandings, to appreciate your care for us, and to experience your presence powerfully active in our world and in our lives. May we combine the wisdom we receive from previous generations and from distant lands with our own insights, our own experiences of the divine encounter, so we will live confidently to serve you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.